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Kennan memo
10/6/1950

1. Whether or not the Kremlin may be said to aspire to "world domination," it has every reason to wish to expand its realm of actual authority on the Eurasian land mass (not to be confused with such things as sovereignty or state borders) to dimensions quite intolerable to the security of the United Kingdom and to the political interests of the United States.

2. Doctrine, tradition, and experience all combine to cause the Soviet leaders to prefer to see this expansion come about through a series of successful political undertakings (including, if necessary, civil war) by their communist followers in other countries rather than by the use of the Red Army, or even of the Satellite armies in outright international conflict. In the authority which the Soviet leaders exercise over communist elements in other countries, and in the variety and effectiveness of the tactics for the pursuit and seizure of power by minorities which they have developed and taught to their followers, they have formidable instruments for destroying the resistance of recalcitrant governments and for bringing the respective peoples under their indirect authority.

3. On the other hand, communist doctrine inclines the Soviet leaders to the belief that the dark forces which control the capitalistic world, rather than permit

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their power to be reduced in this manner, may very well resort to war against the Soviet Union. In any case, the trend of policy in the Western community of nations during the past two years must certainly have caused them to regard international war as an increasingly serious possibility. It is always possible that they may come, or may have already come, to the conclusion that an international war is unavoidable and imminent. In this event, while their own preference might still be for the use of other means to effect the expansion of their power, they would certainly shape their conduct primarily with a view to the successful prosecution of the military conflict which they had reluctantly come to view as no longer avoidable for any great length of time. And when it comes, they would of course exploit for their own political advantage whatever military successes they might have, just as they did during the recent war.

4. Since we cannot tell whether they have passed, in their thinking, this crucial "point of no return" and since we outselves have not yet come generally to regard war as inevitable and wish to avoid it if we can, our own policy must be addressed to each of these two possible contingencies:

(a) that

(a) that the Kremlin has not reconciled itself to the inevitability of war at this juncture and will continue to seek the promotion of its purposes by means short of general war, and

(b) that it may already be too late, and that an early general war, for one reason or another, may be no longer avoided.

5. The question of strengths and weaknesses of the western side in the East-West conflict, varies markedly according to which of these two contingencies you have in mind, and cannot be usefully discussed unless there is clarity upon this point.

6. If you take the first contingency, namely that we are dealing with a Soviet program based on the calculation that general war may still be avoided, then it is not "unity" which is the main requirement for success in the west but a consciousness, on the part of peoples threatened by communist pressures, of the nature of that threat and of the value to themselves of their national independence--combined with sufficient discipline and effectiveness in the internal political processes to deal with the local communist minorities. I would point out that this is the contingency which I personally believe to have been the real one throughout most of the period

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since the recent war and to which the Marshall Plan policy was addressed. Under this policy, we ask nothing more of free countries--as for example of France--than that they should do us and themselves the favor of not permitting their own communist parties to seize power and extinguish their real independence in the interests of a foreign political group. Under this concept, any amount of diversity is acceptable; it can even be a matter of indifference to us, from this standpoint, whether the countries involved have any particular liking for the United States or confidence in its leadership. We can tolerate with equanimity any amount of political idiosyncracy as long as it does not involve, as it did in the case of China, loss of national self-confidence, a lack of awareness of the desirability of preserving national independence, and an inability to resist indigenous communist activities directed to the seizure of State power. Since we know of no people which has been happy under Bolshevist rule, we are at liberty to assume that this requirement of ours upon other people, namely, that they show an effective concern for their own national independence, does not constitute too onerous an intervention into their domestic affairs.

7. If,

7. If, on the other hand, you are departing from the assumption that the Soviet leaders have come to accept war as inevitable and to address their policy mainly to the requirements of such a coming war, then you have indeed a different picture. Here "unity," in so far as it may spell an increase in military strength and effectiveness, attains a far greater importance. But here, too, a great deal of nonsense has been and continues to be talked. Since the termination of hostilities, in 1945, the Soviet leaders have had an overwhelming potential military superiority in western Europe, resting on these three factors:

(a) the prostration of Germany as a military power;

(b) the possession by the Soviet Union of an area of deployment (the Soviet Zone in Germany) in the heart of western Europe; and

(c) the reluctance of the western peoples, outstandingly the United States, to make serious sacrifices for the maintenance of armed strength.

Of these factors, the military prostration of Germany is the decisive one. As long as this situation continues, and particularly as long as Soviet forces are deployed in the heart of Europe, all talk of "restoring balance" by military

by military aid or a European army, or what you will, is chatter. For this, there is no cure in any changes of the internal political situation in Britain and France, unless they are of such a nature as to affect the German problem in a manner favorable to the revival of German strength and its enlistment in western purposes.

8. If these considerations be applied to the German problem, the answer seems to me to read as follows:

(a) In the first contingency (absence of a Soviet policy directed to general war), what is required in western Germany is an effective internal police establishment, or, if you will, a small, compact army, trained and indoctrinated for civil, rather than international, conflict, and capable of coping with the para-military units being built up in eastern Germany;

(b) In the second contingency, you have the alternative of developing and enlisting German military capacities in some way in the general western cause, or of resigning western Europe to communist military conquest and subjugation when

when the moment comes.

9. Actually, however, one cannot so neatly separate thinking under these two different concepts, when it comes to formulation of policy. This is because a great many people in various parts of the world, being accustomed to look for danger in military invasion rather than in domestic intrigue and convinced of the probability of another great conflict, have a tendency to regard the respective capacities of East and West for international war as the crucial determinant of their own personal fate. In this way they tend to discount future political developments according to their analysis of military possibilities. Lacking a sense of military security, they are unwilling to take a firm stand against internal subversion, for fear of being caught out on the wrong side in an eventual military dénouement. A sense of military security is therefore important to the success of political resistance, even though there may never be a general war. And for this reason the military stiffening of western Europe (for which the initiative, incidentally, came from the Europeans and not from us) cannot be dispensed with entirely, and must be approved in some degree, even by those architects of U.S. foreign

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policy who have never themselves believed in the inevitability of war or thought it likely that the Soviet leaders believed in it.

10. We Americans have thus been pressed into the necessity of action directed toward the restoration of Europe's military strength, although we knew that it brought with it immense dangers and disadvantages: notably, that it would spotlight the weakness of the West rather than its strength; that it would steadily draw attention to the controversial problem of Germany as the key factor in that weakness, thereby impairing the very unity of western Europe which was essential to its success; and finally that, by giving the impression that the West had come to accept war as inevitable, it would impel the East to follow suit.

11. All these dangers have developed as foreseen, and haunt us today. Probably none could have been entirely avoided. But all could have been greatly lessened had people been prepared to recognize the difference between a program of Soviet expansion through the exploitation of indigenous groups trained for seizure of power in other countries, on the one hand, and a program of expansion by international war, on the other--and had

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they accordingly tried to hold the Soviet leaders to the former program, where the chances for success were relatively poor, and to dissuade them from the second, where the chances of their creating further grievous damage to all civilization are excellent.

12. From the military standpoint, disunity in the western world is most dangerous when (a) it assumes the form of disagreement and mutual distrust in the handling of the German problem, (b) when it involves suspicion of the motives of the strongest partner, namely, the United States, vis-a-vis the others, and (c) when, in general, the various parties are led to expect too much of each other, which is as fruitful a source of disaster in international life as in the lives of individuals.

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